

Planning Board 2007 Annual Report

To the Honorable Board of Selectmen:

The Ashburnham Planning Board consists of five (5) elected members and one (1) appointed associate member (currently vacant at this time). The Board has the responsibility of reviewing proposed development projects (residential subdivisions, business/commercial and industrial site plans, Common Driveway Special Permits, Open Space Residential Development Special Permits, Accessory Dwelling Unit Special Permits and Scenic Road Permits) and makes decisions on them in accordance with state/local by-laws & regulations. The Zoning Bylaw also allows the Board to review major residential developments to preserve the natural and cultural resources of Ashburnham by insuring the larger-scale of conversion of land to residential use does not consume all of the Town's woodlands, fields, farmlands, historic structures and landscapes, cart paths, stonewalls, geologic formations, water courses, wetlands, riparian zones, groundwater recharge areas, hilltops, scenic vistas, and other significant open spaces as well as providing a public voice and public authority in consideration of alternative approaches to conventional residential developments.

The Planning Board's official powers and responsibilities are provided through the Ashburnham Subdivision Regulations, Zoning By-laws and as prescribed under the authority of the Subdivision Control Law enacted under Chapter 41, Section 81A-81GG of the Massachusetts General Laws. These rules and regulations have been enacted for the purpose of protecting the safety, convenience and welfare of the inhabitants of Ashburnham by regulating the laying out and construction of ways in subdivisions and providing access to lots therein.

At the April 2007 annual town election, John MacMillan was re-elected to a 5-year term and Tom Ruble was elected to a 2-year term. Following the election, the five member Board reorganized and John MacMillan was elected to the position of Chairman, Joseph Kalagher was elected to serve as Vice-Chairman, and Bruce Whitney was elected to serve as Clerk to the Board. The Planning Board regularly met on the 2nd and 4th Thursday evenings at 6:30 p.m. in the Senior Center. In calendar year 2007, the Board conducted 24 regular meetings and performed numerous on-site visits as well as meeting with other Boards and Committees.

Town Planner, Eric R. Smith and Land Use Administrator, Denée Howard, assist the Board. The Board is also responsible for preparing careful studies pertaining to planning issues in the Town and recommending zoning amendments for Town Meeting approval.

During the calendar year 2007, the Board approved 14 "Approval Not Required" (ANR) plans of land as compared to 18 in 2006. The Board endorsed 21 building permit applications for new dwellings in 2007, compared to 19 in 2006.

The Board continues to monitor previously approved Lakeview Estates and Cashman Hill Estates subdivisions during the construction process. The two subdivisions create thirty-one (31) new lots and must meet the requirements of the Growth Limitation Bylaw. The Lakeside Village condominiums previously approved by the Board as an Open Space Residential Development for residents over 55 with 11 duplex units (22 dwelling units) came back before the Board for a modification in 2007. Due to market conditions the developer is requesting that the over 55 age restriction be removed from the Special Permit. Given significant neighborhood opposition to this request, the applicant is working with a new realtor and an increased marketing program to

try and sell the duplex units sold as over 55 units. The applicant has requested a continuation until April 2008, unless any units are sold.

After many years of review and discussion, the Board approved a modification to the Bray Avenue subdivision which was originally approved by the Board back in 1986. The modification creates a nine (9) lot Open Space Residential Subdivision versus the Thirteen (13) lot conventional subdivision plan.

The Board performed 3 Scenic Road hearings in conjunction with the Scenic Road Regulations. Site Plan Review was granted to the Town of Ashburnham for the “Public Safety Building on Central Street”, 35 Main Street for the “GFA Credit Union” and Laidlaw Bus Company on Gardner Road.

No new Preliminary or Definitive Subdivisions were submitted to the Board during 2007, perhaps a sign of the slowdown in the housing market. Also no Common Driveway Zoning Special Permits were issued under the Common Driveway Bylaw for 2007. The Zoning Board of Appeals approved the Town’s first 40B project in 2007. Whitney Park Estates will be comprised of 17 single-family housing units and 98 condominium units. The Planning Board provided the ZBA assistance throughout the entire permitting process.

The Annual Town Meeting adopted zoning amendments submitted by the Board, which created a new Section 5.16, allowing for Accessory Dwelling Units in the RA, RB, GB and VC zoning districts by special permit. Re-zoned portions of Maple Avenue and Puffer Street from residential to industrial use. A comprehensive re-write of Section 5.10, Site Plan Review was also adopted by Town Meeting.

In 2007 the town partnered with the Massachusetts Watershed Coalition in conjunction with a Smart Growth Technical Assistance Grant from the Massachusetts Office of Environmental Affairs to develop a Low Impact Development Bylaw. Low Impact Development, or "LID," is a land development technique that combines innovative site design with advance stormwater treatment to maintain the pre-existing hydrologic system of a site and mitigate impacts of stormwater pollution. The technique provides a means to develop more aesthetically pleasing projects that simultaneously protect open space and water resources. The November Special Town Meeting approved a “Low Impact Development” (LID) general bylaw. A special thanks to the Low Impact Development Bylaw Committee for working so diligently to bring the LID Bylaw to Town Meeting. Committee members who worked on the bylaw are –

Tom Ruble, Chair
Colin Balogh
Mark Dymek
Bob Gingras
Glenn Hathaway

Gary Howland
Robert MacLeod
Steve Nims (01/07-04/07)
Don Ouellette (05/07-11/07)

The Planning Board, with funding approved back at the May 2006 Town Meeting, hired four (4) graduate students of the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, to prepare an “Ashburnham Industrial Land Use Suitability Analysis and Assessment”. After comments by the Planning Board and Town Planner, the final report was delivered to the Planning Board in December 2007. The Planning Board plans to share the findings of this Report with the Town Administrator, Board of

Selectmen and Advisory Board in early 2008 and discuss ways that the Town can begin to implement its recommendations so that the Town can help decrease the residential tax burden.

Bruce Whitney served as the Planning Board representative to the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission, Tom Ruble served as chair of the Low Impact Development Bylaw committee and John MacMillan served as the Planning Board representative on the Affordable Housing Committee.

As we look to the future, the Board will be working with the recently appointed “Village Center Zoning Study Committee” to review and recommend zoning changes in the Village Center District to help stimulate business growth, while preserving Ashburnham’s small town character. The Board is also reviewing the Open Space Residential Development Bylaw to make sure it meets “Smart Growth” principles and is looking at proposing “Wind Energy” zoning. The Board also recommends an update to the Town’s Master Plan.

The Board has instituted an “Open Discussion” session at all of its regular meetings. Any resident may come before the Board without an appointment to comment on an ongoing project or ask questions concerning planning. Public discussion is available between 7:00-7:15 p.m. at all regular Planning Board meetings. We encourage your suggestions and comments.

The Board would like to thank Eric R. Smith, Town Planner, for his continued dedication, expertise and assistance during the past year. Eric continues to be involved with many projects and provides much needed support to the Town.

The Board welcomes Denée Howard as the Town’s Land Use Administrator.

The Planning Board now has a great deal of information on the Town’s new website it can be viewed at www.ashburnham-ma.gov/. We welcome your comments on the website.

Respectfully submitted,

John MacMillan, Chair
Robert MacLeod
Joseph Kalagher, Vice Chair
Bruce Whitney, Clerk
Thomas Ruble